

Detecting & Correcting Errors

When Editors introduce errors

This also has happened to everyone, and it's important to nip the situation in the bud. Often errors are mistakenly introduced in the rapid line-editing process, when copy is being shifted and rearranged. Occasionally errors are introduced by an editor who, to put it plainly, thinks he or she knows better, and changes or includes a fact without looking it up.

A headline writer might put a wrong fact in the story headline, and of course many readers will think it's the mistake of the person whose byline is on the text.

In these cases where the editors were clearly in the wrong, resist the urge to get upset. **Calmly bring the error to your immediate supervisor's attention as soon as possible.** If the story is online, this version can be quickly fixed. If the error is such that it requires a printed correction from the publication, this should indicate that it the error was one of editing and not the reporter's mistake.

It is important to take story changes in stride and be judicious about when to raise a fuss. (Good times to take the issue up with your editor could be when facts or the general story meaning are changed, when especially good or exclusive parts were taken out, when an important source is cut out of the story, or when the writer's voice in an opinion column is altered.) Look on the editing process as a collaborative effort and learn when to pick your battles.

Correcting Copy for Good Taste

Mistakes tend to be inevitable when you're producing an edition every night, often on a limited staff, and there are always readers who are more than happy to overlook what you've done right and let you know what you've done wrong.

But grammar errors and misspelled headlines aside, mistakes within copy such as wrong quotes or misidentifications can call the very credibility of a publication into question.

The allegation of error may be made directly to the reporter or to an editor, who will then judge whether the newspaper did indeed err and what kind of a correction is warranted. The correction is usually printed in the next edition, and is usually worded positively, clarifying the true facts instead of starkly highlighting the newspaper's fault. Example: *"Joe Smith, director of the local food bank featured in Wednesday's editions, is 56 years old."*

Online journalism offers not only wider readership, but also the opportunity to correct errors even faster.

Online publications and blogs alike should always be committed to reporting the truth, and when an error is brought to the site editor's attention it should be dealt with promptly. If not, questions about the site's credibility can easily spread like wildfire across the Web, threatening the time and effort that pro or citizen journalists took to build the site up.

How to remedy the situation depends on:

Pre-established correction rules for the site:

Is the wrong item simply fixed, or is there a notation that alerts readers who might have seen the piece earlier that there was an error in copy?

How bad was the error?

If it's your fault, best to bite the bullet and admit so right out of the gate. Find out how you erred (trusting a bad source, taking bad notes, etc.) and devise how you can prevent such a mistake from happening again (i.e. backing up your notes with an audio recording).

How steamed is the person affected by the copy error?

If they, or someone completely unrelated to the story, simply advises you of a copy mistake, quickly fix it and move on. If the error is so bad as to incite controversy, call a subject's reputation into question or make the subject hopping mad, converse as politely as possible with

the subject, apologize for misquoting or misrepresenting him or her (or whatever the error may be) and publish a correction. Acting swiftly and accepting responsibility works wonders in defusing a potentially ugly situation.

There are times, of course, when a subject claims you've made an error and a thorough review of the facts indicates that you haven't or it can't be proven that you did. At a newspaper, that's what your editor is there for!